

NORTH CAROLINA DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL AND CULTURAL RESOURCES
OFFICE OF ARCHIVES AND HISTORY



Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with Dr. June Atkinson
SHE.OH.010
June 28, 2019

Interview Information:

Interviewer: Ellen Brooks

Interview Location: Wake County, North Carolina

Interview Runtime: 02:44:32

Transcribed By: Annie Anderson, September 2019

Reviewed By: Gretchen Boyles, July 2020

Collection: “She Changed the World” Oral History Project

Interview Summary:

This oral history interview with Dr. June Atkinson covers her general life history with a focus on her career at North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. Dr. Atkinson began her career as a public school teacher, and eventually served in the Department of Public Instruction for forty years. Twelve of those years she served as the North Carolina Superintendent of Public Instruction, having been elected to the post for three terms. Dr. Atkinson is a published author and serves as the current CEO of Emerald Education.

Dr. Atkinson was born and raised in Roanoke, Virginia. She received her higher education degrees in Virginia (Radford University and Virginia Tech) and North Carolina (North Carolina State University). After her undergraduate education and four years teaching in Virginia, she and her first husband moved to Charlotte, North Carolina, where Dr. Atkinson continued her career as a teacher. Following the couple’s divorce, Dr. Atkinson accepted a position in Raleigh with the Department of Public Instruction. She eventually married Bill Gurley.

In the interview, Dr. Atkinson discusses her childhood, her family, and her decision to pursue a college education. She describes the lifelong impact of her first teaching jobs at Northside High School and Myers Park High School, and her subsequent decision to take a job in Raleigh.

Dr. Atkinson describes her work as in the Department of Public Instruction, detailing her successes in increasing access to and advancing the cause of using technology in schools, specifically in business and career technical education. Dr. Atkinson discusses her experiences taking on more responsibilities throughout her career and how she used her skills to be a good leader.

Dr. Atkinson discusses the various people she worked with in state government and explains how she made the decision to run for state superintendent. She describes the legal challenges to her title that she faced in two separate terms. She details her accomplishments while serving as state superintendent. She gives her perspective on the status and future of education and what situations she faced as a woman. At the time of the interview, Dr. Atkinson was serving as the CEO of Emerald Education.

Biographical Sketch:

Dr. June Atkinson (nee St. Clair) was born on August 19, 1948 in Bedford, Virginia to Emily Catherine St. Clair and Clarence William St. Clair. She attended Montvale and Stewartsville Elementary Schools (1955-1963), Staunton River High School (1963-1966), Radford University (1966-1969; B.S. in Business Education), Virginia Tech (1970-1974; M.S. in Vocational and Technical Education) and North Carolina State University (1996; EdD in Leadership and Policy Development). Dr. Atkinson married her second husband William Henry Gurley, III in the early 2000s. Dr. Atkinson has taught in public schools, worked within the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, and served for twelve years as North Carolina Superintendent of Public Instruction. She serves as the CEO for Emerald Education and has authored both textbooks and children's stories.

Archivist's Note:

Transcriptions reflect the original oral history recording. Due to human and machine fallibility transcripts often contain small errors. Transcripts may not have been transcribed from the original recording medium. It is strongly suggested that researchers engage with the oral history recording as well as the transcript. Timestamps are approximate.

Interview Transcript:

Brooks: Today is June 28th, 2019. This is an interview with June Atkinson, who is currently the CEO of Emerald Education, and, uh, June served three terms as the State Superintendent of Public Instruction beginning in 2005. This interview is being conducted for the North Carolina State Archives for the "She Changed the World" Oral History Project. The interviewer is Ellen Brooks. So, we'll just start at the beginning. If you can tell me where and when you were born.

Atkinson: I was born in Bedford County, Virginia on August 19, 1948.

Brooks: And, uh, tell me a little bit about your early life.

Atkinson: Well, I grew up in a rural part of Virginia. I was an only child for fourteen years, and then, after I turned fourteen, my sister was born. I attended a rural school, Montvale. Then, transferred when I was in the sixth grade to another school because my family moved to my daddy's father—my grandfather's—home place, and then I went to Staunton River High School, graduated from there, and then went to Radford University in Virginia to get my bachelor's degree.

Brooks: What did your parents do for a living?

Atkinson: Um, my, uh, dad worked in construction, and my mother worked in a—for various textile companies in the Roanoke Valley. Uh, she did a variety of jobs. And my dad spent most of his working life as a part of construction.

Brooks: And what kind of kid were you? What did you like to do?

Atkinson: Well, as a kid, I had to make my own fun and to create my own environment. I was given free rein to wander in the neighborhood. In the little area where I lived, uh, from birth—well, not 'till birth, but most of my formative years in elementary school—I lived in a little village called Villamont. And Villamont had about, hm, about six or seven houses.

There were, uh, children in the neighborhood. Linda Humphries was my best friend, so she and I roamed the mountains and the forest. We got to discover. In fact, she and I were very adventuresome. We started a business in the fourth grade. Uh, what we did is we took Coca-Cola bottles filled with water to the forest and we found what we called "pugberries," and pugberries have a really rich, red, pinkish color. So, our idea was to squeeze those pugberries into the bottles filled with water, and we would take those bottles to school to sell as ink to our colleagues. But once we got outta the woods with our bottles filled and with pugberry juice all over our clothes our mothers closed our enterprise immediately [both laugh].

But I remember saying, when people asked me what did I wanna be when I grew up, I would say, “Well I want to be the president of the United States.” And, um, I was a good student—loved school. I loved to read. I enjoyed all my teachers, um, we—and I was always inquisitive. And I had lots of opportunity to discover, to create.

Um, and my uncle, [laughs] told me recently that I was the meanest kid that he had ever known—that I could beat up three kids at one time. [laughs] I don't know if that's true, but I grew up bein' independent and feeling as if I could do anything I wanted to do. Uh, it was—I spent a lot of time in the summers with my grandmother and grandfather who lived on top of a mountain, and the nearest neighbor lived a mile away. So, I would play all kinds of games. For example, I would take the cushions off the seats on the chairs on their porch, and I would put them in the middle of the yard, and I would pretend that those seats were a ship. And I would put on my, uh, my aunt's suede—black suede—high heeled shoes and walk from the porch to get on the ship. And then I would take cherry—I mean, um, peach tree—twigs and leaves and make macaroni and cheese—pretend [Brooks laughs]—in my little pans.

[00:05:00]

Atkinson: So, I had to make my own fun, and therefore one thing that, I guess, helped me along the way is that I've never been bored my entire life. I always can make my own fun, and I think one of the reasons is that, as a child, it was up to me to take care of what I liked to do and to create and imagine. My mother worked, uh, my entire life as a student. So, I was very independent. I had to get myself up to go to get ready for school, and then it was my responsibility when I came home to take off my good shoes and put on my play shoes. So, I, uh, had a very nice childhood with very little pressure.

And I always felt that my mother and father found me to be a curiosity. [laughs] Like, What is she going to do next, or, What is she thinking? I just remember perplexed looks on my mom's face, says, Well, I wonder what she's up to now. And, having been the only child, for, uh, fourteen years and having been the only grandchild for nine years, needless to say that I had a lot of attention from my aunts and uncles, and therefore they had a great influence on my growing up also.

Brooks: And so, were both of your parents—were they from the area?

Atkinson: Yes, my mother and my father were from Bedford County. Um, both of my grandfathers—both maternal—well, both my grandfathers—were named John St. Claire. And each had the same rural address: Route one, Blue Ridge, Virginia. And one grandfather was John A. and the other grandfather was John L. And my mother told the story that when my mom and dad got married, she was eighteen and he was about almost twenty-four. But when they got married, and they put the

announcement in the paper, um, it was very confusing for the person taking the information because she said, “Clarence Williams St. Clair, son of John St. Clair Route One, Blue Ridge, Virginia marrying Emily Catherine St. Clair daughter of John L.”—I mean—“John St. Clair of Route One, Blue Ridge, Virginia.” So, it took a little while [laughs] to get that straight. And I've often thought that if they, uh, had a quiz show about—What's My Line—that's an old, old one—that I would be a good candidate for that because of having a grandfather—two grandfathers named the same thing.

Brooks: Mm-hm. So, yeah. So, both your parents had the same last name.

Atkinson: Right.

Brooks: From forever. [laughs]

Atkinson: [laughs] Yes! And it was a little confusing for me. I remember asking my dad when I was in the fourth grade, "Now, you know there are other kids' mothers who have a different name. And so, my name—your name and my momma's name are the same, and why is that?" And he said, "Well, June, you are a thoroughbred." [laughs] And, growing up in a rural area, that made sense to me. You have thoroughbred horses, so.

Brooks: Sure [laughs].

Atkinson: So, that satisfied my curiosity for the time being.

Brooks: So, what about school? What kind of student were you?

Atkinson: I was a good student. Um, I loved to learn all kinds of things. Um, I was—I always made good grades. I remember my fourth grade teacher—and one of my favorite teachers—Miss Maria Anderson, saying on my report card that I had so much potential, and I guess that was a time—that was an ah-ha moment for me in the fourth grade when she wrote such a glowing report of my potential that I realized well, "Ah, woah, maybe I do have a lot of potential." I hadn't thought about it before that.

But, um, Misses Anderson was my first teacher who came from a place other than Virginia and came from a place other than Bedford County or Roanoke County. And I looked at her as being from a foreign place. The place was Michigan. [both laugh] But, she was so different. Her accent was different. Her husband was stationed in that area. Um, her husband was in the air force, and so she was teaching while he was stationed there. But I remember, she took Michael Connor and me out to eat at the end of the fourth grade for the two of us having the best grades of the boys and the girls in our school. So, she was one of my favorite teachers, and she was one who helped me understand the world is bigger than Bedford County.

I remember her having lessons about the Scandinavian countries, and—Denmark, and Sweden, and Finland—and I'm thinking, Whoa, that's so far away. I wonder if I'll ever get to travel to those places. I mean, here I thought Michigan was almost a foreign place. But, you know, as life has its way, you know, I've been able to travel all over the world. And I've certainly been to the Scandinavian countries and when I went to Denmark for the first time, I could not help but think of Miss Maria Anderson.

[00:10:00]

Atkinson: But I had good teachers. Uh, I was in a small school. All of the—it seems if we had a great community of support. I remember that we would play with the janitor at the school. He would play with us. We had a great time. I remember my first principal was Mr. McKee, and Mr. McKee had a bullhorn, and he had one arm. And he really ruled that school with an iron hand. Um, I remember my first-grade teacher, Ms. Foggy, who said I was a nice student, but I talked too much.

Also, I remember being on the bus as a first grader, and our lunch cost twenty-five cents, and so my mom or dad would give me twenty-five cents to buy my lunch, and I dropped it on the school bus. Could not find it. My aunt—who was a senior at the same time I was a first grader—and I hunted. Could never find that quarter. So, she gave me a quarter for lunch. She said, "But I'm not going to give you money for ice cream because you were careless." So, I accepted that punishment. And Brenda Hickman—one of my first grade friends—and I went to the place where you bought ice cream, and my aunt sold ice cream, so I just stood there while Brenda went to get her ice cream, and I guess my aunt [laughs] felt sorry for me, so she said, "Okay, June, you can go in to get, uh, a grape popsicle just this one time," so I got my grape popsicle [Brooks laughs]. But it's amazing how little things stick with you because, you know, that was a lesson in compassion from someone else. And, you know, I think that was a great lesson to learn as an early child.

Brooks: Wow. That's an amazing thing to remember, yeah. Um, so, at what point did you kind of start to think about next steps? Did you know you were gonna go to college? Did you have a career in mind?

Atkinson: No. I mean, when somebody would ask me, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" I would just pull anything outta a hat. Like I mentioned earlier, "Oh, I want to be President of the United States." And I do not remember thinking at all about having a career. I did no career planning. I just really didn't think about it. It was—it was as if I lived one day at a time, or I was involved in the day-to-day of what I was doing.

I did, in high school, take business courses. Um, they were among my favorite, and they were the classes for which I had to do the most work. Um, and I

remember as a senior in high school, sitting in homeroom—in Ms. Howell's homeroom—across the, um, walkway—well, not a walkway, but across the desk—sat, um, Shirley Wills, one of my friends, and I kept saying, "I don't know what I wanna do. I don't know whether or not I wanna go to college, or whether I wanna go to business school and be a secretary." And I remember Shirley lookin' at me and sayin, "Well, for heaven's sake, June, will you please make up your mind?" And that tipped me over to make up my mind, so I went to the school counselor's office, and I said, "Well, I'd like to apply to Radford to go to college." And that was the only college I applied to, and it was really last minute. 'Cause I was just waiting, I guess, for divine intervention as to what did I want to be when I became an adult.

And, really, even though my mother had worked her entire life, aunt and the women surrounding me—except for my grandmother—had worked their entire life. I don't know if I had the notion that someday a man on a white horse would come sweep me away, and he would take care of me the rest of my life. You know, that was a little strange when I looked at my family and women had to work, and why would I have that idea? But, um, I went to college, majored in business and I thought, Well, if I teach, then, I mean, I'll have two options. I can teach, or I can work in business. My friend Linda Humphries—the one I mentioned earlier—had a sister who had gone to Radford and who had majored in business education. So, she was a business teacher. And I was always fascinated with her typing and her ability to write in shorthand. So, I think that Sylvia, her sister, had some influence in my being interested in business.

[00:15:22]

Atkinson: I know when I was in the third grade I asked for a typewriter for Christmas, so my dad and mom bought me a Tom Thumb Typewriter, and I still have it. It's in a green case. You have to hit the keys with a hammer almost [Brooks laughs] because they're so difficult to depress. But I would spend hours just plunking on that typewriter, so I think Sylvia might have had some influence on my wanting to major in business. My aunt, who, um, went to business school, probably had some influence, but I went to Radford, majored in business, and then student taught at a school called Williamsburg High School, and I had great supervising teachers, and I knew that I needed a job, and there was—the business ed supervisor came to my class while I was practicing teaching, and he observed me teach, and then he offered me a contract to teach in Roanoke County, so that's where I started my teaching, uh, career was at Northside High School in Roanoke County, Virginia.

Brooks: And you went to Radford, and that's in Virginia?

Atkinson: Right.

Brooks: How far was it from home?

Atkinson: It seemed as if it was across the world, but it was only a forty-five minute to sixty-minute drive from Roanoke. So, it was far enough away, but close enough where I could come home on the weekends.

Brooks: And your, uh, you mentioned you were an only child until you were fourteen. You have a younger sister?

Atkinson: Yes.

Brooks: Mm-hm. And what was that—

Atkinson: Well—

Brooks: I mean, different relationship—

Atkinson: When I was thirteen, I was washing the dishes one night and my momma said to me, "June, your daddy and I are going to have a baby." And I cried and cried and cried, and the reason why I cried was not because I didn't want them to have a child, it was that I was afraid because they were so old that they would die, and that I would have the responsibility for rearing the child. And I knew that I was not equipped to rear a child. So that's the reason why I cried. And I never necessarily explained that to my momma as that was the reason I cried, but I remember her saying, "You'll never have to babysit for the child unless you want to babysit." I guess she saw that as a way of making me feel more comfortable in having a child.

But, so, about a year later, momma had Bonnie. My sister was born in February, but I'll never forget when momma went to the doctor to find out she were pregnant she was driving up this—we had this long, country driveway road to get to the house—and my girlfriend, Gale, was with me, and I remember I was looking out the door and she looked up at me and I said "Well, I guess mom will tell us whether she's pregnant." And I remember Gale looking at me, and she said, "I sure hope it roller-skates." [laughs] And the reason why she said that was that there was a Johnson & Johnson baby powder commercial where a little boy comes to his friend's house, and he says to the little boy, "Oh, I hear you have a new surprise at your house," and he says, "Yes, come in!" And it was a baby, and one little boy looks to the other and says, "Oh, my momma says that we're gonna have a surprise too, and I sure hope it's roller-skates." [Brooks laughs] So, that's why Gale said, "I sure hope it's roller-skates."

But it was exciting. I would go to school—Stewartsville School—and I would walk in and people would say, "Has your mom had the baby yet?" "No, not yet." And Stewartsville had about 293 students in first grade through second grade—well, I mean not second grade—through twelfth grade—and you walked into Stewartsville, and you walked into the gym, and there were classes all around the gym, and there was a stage—it was a multipurpose place—so everyone convened

in that area before school. So, you know, in my walking to my seventh grade or eighth grade class, people would ask me about that.

But, I remember going—my aunt picking me up after my sister was born, and we went to the hospital to see my sister, and my mother and I just looked at Bonnie, and I thought, and I said to my mom, "Oh, she's the most beautiful baby I've ever seen." [both laugh] So, it was different. In retrospect, my mother was more like a sister to my—to my—I mean, my mother is more like a sister to my sister, and I was more like a mother to my sister. Um, and [laughs] I know, as my sister was growing up, she would say to my mother, "Don't tell June." And, you know, it would've been the other way around, [Brooks laughs] but I remember just loving her so much. And when my sister was—well I guess by the time when she was born—by the time she was ready to go to school, I was away at college, and I remember reading a letter or an essay that my sister had written that really she didn't know her sister very well, and I thought, "Oh, I know her so well and she doesn't know me," and she's right that she didn't know me because I was away, and I hardly came home.

[00:21:02]

Brooks: That must be hard. Yeah. Um, and so your first job, um, you said it was in Roanoke County?

Atkinson: Mm-hm.

Brooks: And so, where were you living? Were you living on your own then?

Atkinson: Well, then, I had started teaching in August. I graduated from college in three years, and um, a quarter, so I had just turned twenty-one when I first started teaching. So, I lived with my aunt and uncle until I got married, and I got married in November after having started teaching in August. So, uh, as soon as I got married my husband and I—my first husband and I—lived about, um, two to three miles from the school where I taught, and while I taught, he finished his degree at Virginia Tech in engineering. So, we had—I had—just a few months from August to November to live with my aunt and uncle while I taught at Northside High School.

Brooks: So, and what were you teaching? What were the classes that you were teaching?

Atkinson: Well, the first year I taught keyboarding, and a course called Introduction to Business, and it was an ideal situation in that Joyce Nowell, who was the department head, gave me an extra planning period because I was a new teacher and I'm thinking, Well that would be great for every new teacher. But I was in a very supportive school, and Joyce and all of the business teachers helped me in my first year of teaching.

I remember I had thirty-five eighth graders in homeroom. That was an interesting experience, of having all thirty-five girls in homeroom, and I had also had those same girls in study hall. We had study hall in the auditorium where you could barely see one foot in front of the other. And we had to space about 200 students in the auditorium for study hall because we lacked space. And so, I had my eighth-grade girls in one corner, and it wasn't an ideal situation, but they were sweet girls, and I enjoyed them.

Then the second year or the third year—I don't recall—I had thirty-five tenth grade boys in homeroom. And [laughs] they—those boys were fun too. They were always finding ways to get my attention. For example, they would pick up my timer that I needed for keyboarding class off my desk and put it at the other end of the class. Well, they were always asking me probing questions just to see my reaction.

And I'll never forget that year at Christmas, I came into class on the last day, and I had all these presents piled on my desk from those tenth-grade boys. And I remember one student gave me and made me an eagle, and I still have it, even though I broke it in half. I still have both pieces. And then another student gave me a spice rack with about twenty or thirty different spices, and even though that's been a long, long time, I still have that spice rack, and I cannot part with it because it means so much to me that my students care enough to give me a present. So, that was a really interesting experience, and I had tenth grade boys who were on the football team, and I was a cheerleading sponsor, and I had to—[laughs] and it would not happen at this day and time—but I was responsible for getting all the cheerleaders to the football games. We couldn't ride the bus with the football players, which is something I could never understand because when I was in high school and played basketball, the cheerleaders and the boy's team and the girl's team rode the school—I mean, rode the bus—to all the away games.

[00:25:23]

Atkinson: So, it was a fun concept to me, that the cheerleading sponsor had to find to ways to get the cheerleaders to the game. Now, had it been today I would not have accepted that role. [laughs] And I probably wouldn't have had to fought too much, but I had to get them to the football games. Anyway, it was a wonderful experience, and, um, I had great students, and I had students who were at the top of the class, and who would be at the bottom of the class, but they were—I just loved them all. They were fun to have, and some were trying, [laughs] and some were not.

I remember having one student in homeroom who got in trouble with some of the other teachers. And so, one day the guidance counselor brought the student to my class—it was a keyboarding class—and the guidance counselor said, "You make sure he stays here until the end of the period, and then I'll come back for him." Because the guidance counselor wanted him to pass, and he needed to make up

his work. So, it was about ten minutes before class was to end, and he stood up, and I went to him and said, "Where are you going?" And he said, "Well, I'm going to my locker." I said, "Remember the guidance counselor said that you have to stay." And he says, "What are you going to do if I don't?" And the student in front of him and stood up, and he said, "If you get outta this class, you're gonna have to walk over me first." I thought, "Wow! Wow, I didn't have to do anything!" [laughs] That student took care of that! It just so happens that student was one of the members of the football team, so that took care of that. So it was nice to have students take a stand. And I'm appreciative of what that student did because I don't know how I would've stopped that student from leaving the class, but I didn't have to deal with that.

Brooks: Wow.

Atkinson: So, it was a wonderful experience, teaching at Northside High School because of the support and the students. It was a great situation for a new teacher.

Brooks: Did you like what you were teaching? The keyboarding and the business?

Atkinson: Oh, yeah. I loved my Introduction to Business class, it's a—then, and it is now—it's a class that teaches personal finance. Yes, I remember teaching insurance and a teacher there at the school gave me some excellent ideas on how to teach insurance. I mean, frankly, how can one get excited about insurance [Brooks laughs] and teaching insurance? But, the teacher, my colleague, gave me the idea; it's that you ask your students to think of a poem or a song or something dealing with where an accident occurred or where you may think a student—I mean, a person—needs some type of insurance, and let the students come up with a song or whatever, the poem, is and let them decide what kind of insurance. And so, you think about, "Jack and Jill went up the hill to fetch a pail of water." What kind of insurance would Jack need if he were married and had a family of three children? What type of insurance would he need if he were not married? And if he were out of work for ten months? So, that was just a great experience for the kids, and they really got into that. So each student had to present his or her poem, or song and talk about the types of insurance, and so they could go to reference the book, and it was a wonderful learning experience, and I still remember it after all this time.

We did comparative shopping, and I remember that a student named Bobby who did his research about aspirin, and it was a learning experience for me to learn that aspirin is aspirin. So, Bayer aspirin, even though it cost more, really had the same ingredients as other aspirin. So why would I buy Bayer rather than just aspirin? And then we did, um, did a fun project about labor management and relations where I divided the class into labor and management of a bubble gum company, and so they had to negotiate a contract between the managers and workers.

[00:29:57]

Atkinson: And they had to obey all of the federal and state laws, so I gave them a list of federal and state law, so they had to do research, and it was fun watching them negotiate with each other who won—who could negotiate the better contract. So, it was, uh a competition, and then I remember another unit about—well, insurance was fun we just had lots—I said I remember but at this point I was thinking about the labor management—we just did lots—Oh! The stock market. We did the stock market. And we collected fifty cents from each student we had a stockbroker come to class to talk about buying stock, and he was willing to make this, little, small investment for us—fifty cents from two classes—and the students wanted to buy Canadian export gas and oil rather than another one because you can get more shares, so it was a good lesson for them that just because you get more shares doesn't mean you necessarily make more money. We lost money. [laughs] But it was a fun project. So, it was a great class to teach, and it was a good learning experience for me as a twenty-one-year-old.

Brooks: Yeah, um, and how long were you at that school?

Atkinson: I was there for four years.

Brooks: Okay. And—

Atkinson: And my husband graduated from Virginia Tech and took a job with Duke Power in Charlotte, North Carolina. So, that's how I made it to Charlotte, North Carolina to teach and, um, that's where I taught for almost four years. But I remember applying for a job with Charlotte-Mecklenburg, and they gave us a date to come to Charlotte to meet with—uh, I didn't realize—to meet with all the hundred-something other people who were applying for a job. [I] remember the human resource associate superintendent or director saying to us, "You know we really have a surplus of teachers now, and it will probably be very difficult for you to get a job here." He was very, very positive [laughs] about getting a job, and I was interviewed by a middle school principal, and he asked about my interest in teaching middle school. Well, I guess I was too young not to finesse my answers, and I said, "You know, I'm really not interested in just teaching middle school. I want to teach at a high school level." [Brooks laughs] So I realized that my chances of getting a job through a regular route of going through the human resources director and being interviewed—my chances were slim.

So, I looked up in my business education journal who was the vocational technical education director, and that's what they were called then. And, so, one day, while my husband and I were in Charlotte, um, I just decided to drop into that office, and I was dressed for an interview, but I went to the education building in Charlotte, went to whatever floor—maybe fourth floor or fifth floor—and went to the offices, and I said to administrative assistant, "I'm June Atkinson, and I'm moving to Charlotte from Roanoke, Virginia, and I've taught for four years, and I just—I know I don't have an appointment—but I just wanted to meet Mrs. Dorothy Boone. Uh, to meet her, and to say hello to her, and that I'm

applying for a job." And it just so happened that Mrs. Dorothy Boone's office was in sight distance from the receptionist, so Mrs. Dorothy Boone saw me, so she came out, took me into her office, and she said, "Well, tell me a little about yourself." I told her, and she said, "Well, could you go to Myers Park High School today to talk with the principal. We have an opening at that school." And I said, "Of course." And so she told me how to get to Myers Park High School because this was before GPS, so I went to Myers Park High School and met with Dr. Lewis, the principal, for about fifteen minutes max. It didn't seem—it really wasn't very long, so I just told him a little bit about myself, that I was moving to Charlotte, and I taught for four years. And anyway, Mrs. Boone told me to come back to her office after I had talked with the principal, so I came back and met with her very briefly and then met with John Bunch who was directly over all of the business teachers in Charlotte. So, I talked with him and he says, "Well, look for information, a contract from us in the next three weeks." So, I did, and I got the job as a business co-op teacher at Myers Park High School.

[00:35:02]

Atkinson: So that really taught me that timing is important, [Brooks laughs] and you have to pursue more than one way to get employment when a door is closed, because I thought the door was closed with the human resource director. So, I knew that the business ed supervisor in Roanoke County had a lot of pull in what teachers were hired, and I made the assumption that was true in Charlotte-Mecklenburg, and it was true. I started teaching at Myers Park High School, and as a business co-op teacher, I had a ten-month contract compared to other teachers that had a 180-day contract. So, I arrive at school ahead of all the other teachers—it was my responsibility to give thirty-five students jobs. Oh, my schedule was that I taught three periods a day, and then the other two periods I would find my students jobs, and once I found them jobs I would check on them periodically, and then it would be my responsibility was to relate what I was teaching in the classroom with the jobs that they had. And the teacher before me left a very detailed folder about each of my students; their strengths, their weaknesses, and some possible places to contact for finding them jobs. So, I lived with a map of trying to find all of these businesses because I had been to Charlotte twice before I started teaching. But I remember being in my class, and it was this tiny little class. It was at the back of another class there was glass partition between my tiny little class that had fifteen desks, and the class beside me that had thirty-some.

But, anyway, I was there the first day, the second day, and I had parked by the business and math building in a gravel parking lot—there were no lines—and I noticed this other teacher was coming in, parked her car. So, I thought, Oh, yay, I'm going to meet somebody! So, I go out of my classroom and here comes this woman down the hall. And I said, "Hi, I'm June Atkinson. I'm the new business teacher here." She said, "Is that your car? In the parking lot?" And I said, "Yes, ma'am." And she said, "I have been parking in that space ever since I've been teaching here at Charlotte, at Myers Park High School, and I would appreciate if

you would not park in that spot." And I said, "Well, yes ma'am." I thought, "Well, what a reception that is."

And so the next thing that happened to me, is that I got my student schedule and I realized that I had thirty-five students in first and second—the same thirty-five students in first and second period, and I only had fifteen desks. I thought, Well, this can't work. So, I go to the office and I say to the principal, "I have thirty-five students in first and second period, and I only have fifteen desks. Could you help me?" And the principal said to me, "Well, I am sure that you can work that out." I thought, Hmm, work that out. Alright, I'll work that out. So, I go to the teacher who was—because, by then the other teachers had come—so I go to the teacher in the class where I could see, with the glass partition, and I said to her, "Hi, I'm June Atkinson. I'm the new teacher here, and I noticed I have thirty-five students in my first and second period. Would it be possible for us to switch classes?" And her response was, "You know, I have been teaching here at Myers Park High School for I-don't-know-how-many years, this is the classroom I've been in, and no, I will not switch with you." Well. So, what to do? So, what I did was that I went to the office—this was before computerization—I went to the office and pulled every single student in my first and second period. The thirty-five students and I looked to see what the teacher who had thirty-five desks was teaching. So, I put fifteen of my students in her class first period and fifteen of my students in her class the next period. So that took care of my problem. And I never told anyone that I had done it because I thought the principal had given me permission to take care of the situation, and I did that.

[00:40:09]

Brooks: Yeah. [both laugh] Creatively!

Atkinson: Yeah, so I should've had my students for a two-hour block, but I only had them for an hour block. And, I eventually told Mr. Bunch, the supervisor, that that was the case, but I found those thirty-five students jobs. And, it was a rewarding experience because the students really could see the relevancy of what I was teaching, and one of my assignments to them after about a month of school was for them to interview people in their workplace, and to find out what workers—at the banks, at medical clinics, manufacturing companies—really wished they should have learned, and what was important to learn. And, so, students gave reports about what they thought was important. It was always affirmation because that was what I was going to teach anyway. But it was really rewarding, uh, to do that.

And I had students, again, who were in the top of my class—well, not in my class—but in the top of the class, and uh, at lower half—I mean lower rung of academic achievement. And I especially loved teaching the students who were struggling, and who may not be as interested, because I felt as if those students needed me more than the students who were making good grades. And, that first

year of teaching at Myer's Park High School was—without those students I would've been very discouraged because I had gone from a school that was with a faculty members were very supportive to each other to a school where I did not find that same degree of support.

And I remember, that I was in the business and math building, and I remember one of the math teachers saying to me, "Oh, you're the teacher—you're the new teacher who caused the other teacher to have a nervous breakdown." And I thought, Well, that's some kind of reception. And then he went on to say, "And you're the teacher who has—you're the teacher who has all of the dummies." And I was so insulted—not for me, but for my students—and I said to him, "Certainly speaks well of my ability to teach because I can teach them so they will learn. I hope you can do the same thing." [laughs] So, I was a little feisty. Which, as a child, no one ever said to me I needed to filter what I said. So, I guess, I grew up with not filtering, necessarily what my thoughts were. But, I remember after a while of being there he asked if I had any special materials because he had some students that were struggling in math, and he wanted to know if I had materials that would reach them, and I was more than happy to share.

Brooks: And how did you feel about leaving Virginia and moving to North Carolina?

Atkinson: Oh, I went kicking and screaming. Um, I found that one thing about me is where I'm planted—that I really, um, like that place. And so, it was very difficult for me emotionally to move to another place. So, you know, I had that support system of my family and his family and friends we'd had all the way through his college career, high school career. So it was very difficult to leave a setting where you had that support to a place where I didn't know anyone other than my husband. So that was—that was a little difficult. But, uh, he had, at work, two friends: Dennis—oh, so what was the other guy's name—Dennis, and another friend, and they made friends immediately, so we three couples became fast friends and did lots of things together.

Brooks: That's great. So, you managed to find a bit of a community there. That's—that's important.

Atkinson: But it was a little—and it was also an adjustment because no one left my world in Virginia, but Dennis and his wife moved to South Carolina, so that was like, Oh my gosh, this is a transient place. You make friends and then they leave!"

[00:45:16]

Atkinson: And then I had another friend there who was a teacher, uh, a business co-op teacher at another school. Her husband was with the FBI. So, she was a friend and she moved away. So, I found that a little difficult to adjust to having friends who moved away.

Brooks: Mm. Yeah. Um, and how long—so you said you were at Myers Park for about four years?

Atkinson: Mm-hm. I was working on my fourth year before I left in October.

Brooks: Oh, okay. Um, what caused you to leave?

Atkinson: Well, my husband and I separated. And, you know, I was continuing to teach in Charlotte. One day the business co-op teachers from all of the high schools in Charlotte-Mecklenburg got together for lunch at the end of school. Um, they were a part of my support system, and one of the teachers said, "Oh, Macel Vaya [sp?] has retired from being the Business Ed supervisor in the Department of Public Instruction. I wonder who will get her job?" And I said, in a very teasing way, "I think I'll apply for her job." Didn't think anything else about it until I was working with a travel agency. And one day I received a telephone call from a guy named Dr. Charles Law, and Dr. Law said, "June, you have been recommended to apply for Macel Vaya's [sp?] job, and I'm calling to see if you're interested." Well, I had just called someone with some travel arrangements, and I said, "Well, yes, I'm really interested in that job."

Because, flashback to my job in Roanoke County, I went to a conference with my friend Dale, and she and I were sitting, um, at Hotel Roanoke, waiting for the session to start, and all the sudden the room became quiet. And I looked, and there this stately woman dressed in a beautiful baby-blue suit with spiked high heels and with gray hair, and she walked up the middle isle and I said, "Who is that, Dale?" And she said, "Oh! That's Margery Crumbly the Business Ed supervisor for Virginia. She worked for the Department of Education." And I just flippantly said, "Well, I want her job one day."

So, fast forward, I'm in Charlotte, Charles Law calls and asked if I'm interested in the job. And he says, "Well, if you'll head to Raleigh for an interview on Thursday and I said, "Oh, I'm really interested in this job, but I'm leaving for Las Vegas on Thursday, and I won't be able to come." And he says, "Okay, what about our coming to Charlotte tomorrow for an interview with you?" And I said, "Fine." So Charles Law and Bob Mullins from the Department of Public Instruction came to Charlotte, they asked for a place where we could have lunch. We went to the place—we went to Sluggs, that was the name of the place for lunch—and they interviewed me and brought me back to the travel agency and said, "If we're interested in you, we'd like you to come to Raleigh on Monday for a job interview." And I said, "Oh, Dr. Law, I am really interested in this job and hope that you're really interested in me, but when I return from Las Vegas, on Sunday, I am leaving on Monday to go to Colombia for two weeks, but I will be glad to come to an interview." And he says, "Okay, if we're interested in you, we will call you once you return from Colombia." So as I am putting the key in the door of my house, the telephone is ringing. So I drop my suitcase, run upstairs, answer the phone. It's Dr. Law. He says, "We're interested in your, uh, coming for

a second interview. Could you come to Raleigh for a second interview this week?" And I said, "Yes, [Brooks laughs] whatever day you would like me to come I will be glad to come." So, I remember, I put on a blue dress with a paisley blue and yellow scarf and my high heels, and I come to the Department of Public Instruction for an interview. And then the Department of Public Instruction was located where the attorney general's office is now.

[00:50:11]

Atkinson: So, I came for the interview, there were three people—one woman. And the woman asks me this question, "You will be working with men, and how do you feel as if you can do, as a woman, to supervise men?" And I have no idea what I said to her, but I know what I was thinking, and I was thinking, You know what, I had thirty-five tenth grade boys in homeroom, and if I can work with them, control them, then surely I will not have any problems dealing with adult men. But anyway, they offered me the job, and I moved to Raleigh.

Brooks: Wow.

Atkinson: And that's where I started my career with the Department of Public Instruction. And, um, at the time I was—it was called chief consultant—so I was hired as the business education chief consultant. And I was to supervise two women who had worked in the department for many, many years. And I realize, I am twenty-six years old or twenty-seven, and here are two people who have made a career working in the department, and I need to win them over as their supervisor. So, I invited them to my house, and I did whatever I could to honor their experience and to show that I value their experience in decision-making.

So, I started as the business education chief consultant, and I knew I had to win over the business teachers in the state, um, so I traveled a lot throughout North Carolina, meeting business teachers and uh, then vocational, technical directors, who had the responsibility. And it was, um—one of my goals was to increase the number of business teachers who came to the state business education conference—it was a part of vocational, technical education. So, when I started as business education chief consultant, there were about ninety-eight teachers who attended. So, my goal was to get at least six-hundred business teachers to the summer conference. And my last year as business education supervisor we had something like five-hundred-and-ninety-some business teachers. And I thought, Well, I met that goal. I'm ready for another challenge.

Brooks: Wow. And how did it - how did the meeting with those two women—the ones you had to supervise—how did that go? How did they receive you?

Atkinson: Um, from my perspective, they were very supportive of the work. Uh, there was some changes I wanted to make in business education—standards, and the business education curriculum. Because at that point I felt as if I knew a lot

[laughs] at twenty-six. [laughs] But, I listened to their ideas, and they listened to mine. And I think that I had a really good relationship with Elizabeth and Catherine. And I supported their work. I tried to highlight their ideas and tried to give them credit for their ideas. So, we had a really good working relationship, and we had lots of laughs and lots of fun, and Catherine could've retired when I became state—I meant when I became chief consultant—she didn't. I saw that as support of me, because if she didn't like me, she could leave.

Brooks: Mm-hm [laughs].

Atkinson: And she didn't, so she stayed, uh, I think two or three years after I became, um, chief consultant, so I saw that as a plus. And then Elizabeth and I worked together for a number of years, and I think she felt my support. She became the FDLA state supervisor—uh, state advisor—and I did whatever I could to support her. And I was able to hire two more business ed consultants, which lightened the load of Elizabeth's and my load.

[00:55:11]

Atkinson: We just had a lot of fun, and it was during the time computers were being introduced into education. So, North Carolina was among the first states in the nation to introduce computers—personal computers—to be used as a part of its business education curriculum. By this time, Catherine had retired, guy named Rick Beauregard [sp?], and Hattie Blue [sp?], two wonderful people were hired as business ed supervisors—or, consultants.

And I remember being at Crabtree Valley Mall, walking, and I saw RadioShack, and I saw general ledger software and accounts receivable software. So, I walked in asked the guy, Mike Flink [sp?], and I asked, "Did you take accounting in high school?" And he said, "As a matter of fact, I did. I took accounting at Sanderson High School here in Raleigh." And I said, "Could general ledger and accounts receivable and accounts payable software—could that had been used to do the practice set that you had to do in accounting?" And he said, "Yeah, as a matter of fact it could be." And I said, "Well, can you help me learn that software so that accounting teachers could use it in schools?" So, Mike, an employee of RadioShack came to visit Elizabeth, and Hattie, and me, and he showed us how the software could be used on old TRS-80 computer. And what we did was that we brought in accounting teachers—because I knew that teachers listen to teachers. So, we brought in eight accounting teachers, to learn the software, and Mike taught them how to use the software for the practice set. And so they were excited about that.

So, we set up workshops all across North Carolina where RadioShack loaned us computers to take to these initial workshops. So, we hauled, in station wagons belonging to the state, RadioShack computers and set them up—it's not like laptop today. So, we, in fact, Hattie and I were on our way to Salisbury at eleven

o'clock at night and highway patrol stopped us because the car was at a slant [laughs] going down the road because it was loaded with computers. And we would set them up, and the teachers would come. And so accounting teachers across North Carolina got excited—not all—but many of the teachers became excited about being able to use software and computers in the classroom.

And then the Southwestern Publishing Company, Houghton Mifflin, and Gregg/McGraw-Hill were the three major publishers of business education at the time, so they sent people here to see what we were doing. And I said to Rick and the others, "We can't haul this software—we can't haul these computers across the state, and we gotta find a better way." So, we came up with the idea of taking a picture of the keyboard, and then we made a flipchart of the software. So you know, where it says, "Turn it on," you would have the first page turn and we would tell them, "Press this button." Pretend, on these keyboards, then flip the page. So, we taught them how to use general ledger software and accounts receivable software, and accounts payable software by pretend. [Brooks laughs] And we laughed about it, and I wish I had kept one of those books because we went through the tedious process—every component of the software—to show them how to use the software. So, as a result of being one of the first states in the nation to use computers in business courses, Houghton Mifflin asked me would I write a book, and I did, and it was called, *Help with Computer Literacy*. So, I wrote the book and then Houghton Mifflin asked me to go to Boston, Massachusetts—their headquarters—to teach their editorial staff about computers. So, I took a vacation from the Department of Public Instruction, to go to Boston to show them how to use computers, and Houghton Mifflin was getting into the market, so they scheduled workshops across the United States during the weekends, and I was one of the featured speakers so I would get on a plane on Friday afternoon, and fly to someplace, speak on Saturday and come back on Sunday.

[01:00:29]

Atkinson: So, as a result I spoke in at least forty states about using computers in business education.

Brooks: Wow. Do you kind of remember your own reactions to computers becoming a thing and, kind of, having to learn how they work and how you can use them?

Atkinson: Well, I read a book by Christopher Evans, it is dated—I think the date is 1976—still had the book, and Christopher Edwards—Christopher Evans—was very visionary in talking about the role of computers. So that book had a huge influence on where I thought business was going in the United States, and so consequently, in some respects, that was a roadmap for me in leading efforts in business education in North Carolina to another place. And I embraced them, because, that book talked about how they—that one day, we would access the whole Library of Congress by just a click in a computer. And he talked about how

jobs would change and how that the technical jobs—computer programmer and computer scientists—would become more valuable while jobs that had some degree of repetition would become less important. And it made sense to me, and I thought it was important for our business teachers to be able to make those changes along the way so that our students will be prepared for the world they're going to face, and so, I was pushing that those electric typewriters should be taken out of our keyboarding classes and trade them for computers.

And I remember going to Hoke County where the business ed, or the vocational director, wanted me to talk to the teachers about how to replace all those electric typewriters in the classroom with computers because you needed a more versatile tool. And, as I was talking to them, I could tell that they wanted to laugh. [both laugh] And I said to them, "Just go ahead and laugh. Just get it out of your system. Go ahead and laugh." And they did. They all laughed to say, "Oh, this will never happen," and the supervisor bought—replaced all of those electric typewriters with computers so they were in the forefront in Hoke County in using computers in their business education classes, and it just caught on.

And more and more people and more and more teachers realized they could be on the cutting edge, and that they could do so much more in using a computer in keyboarding in word processing than they could on that blasted electric typewriter where you had to use white-out or a correction tape and all those things. So, it was a matter of convincing some champions in the state, and I was convincing myself.

And in the 1980s—and I have absolutely no idea why I was invited—but I was invited to speak at an international conference on technology in education in Edinburgh, Scotland. And so, I did a lot of work to prepare for that speech of fifteen minutes. But, they paid my way to go to Edinburgh, Scotland to speak, and I spoke about the future of technology, and even though it was in 1985, that speech framed my model of where I wanted education to go as related to technology. And, candidly, it's been very gratifying and on target where education has gone and where education will be. And I wrote a brochure that—when I became state superintendent—the brochure—it's 2020, um, about—well, that's the topic of my speech, 2020.

[01:05:16]

Atkinson: You know, I talked about how we could use a virtual school, and I may not have used the same terms but I talked about learning would take place in a blended approach, and that teachers would be located in all parts of the world, and that teachers would rely on people from all parts of the world, and that it would be the responsibility of the teachers to take care of the social, emotional component of student learning and be a facilitator of learning. And lo-and-behold, that's where we are today because North Carolina has—the North Carolina Virtual Public School—the second largest in the nation with 50,000 students enrolled in one or

more of the courses, and I'm pleased to have been a part of putting that together for North Carolina.

And then I think about my own learning. I'm in my second year of learning how to play the piano, and one of my teachers is located in Australia. And when I forget what my face-to-face teacher has taught me, I just go to Neil Moore's website, Simply Music, and I see, again, what I should know about playing the piano. So, in my own life my predictions have come true.

But, uh, I just—I knew that computers would be a part of changing education, and, candidly, we have yet to see what technology, artificial intelligence, will do for and with education, and I thought it was important for educators to carve the pathway, rather than the pathway being carved for educators. Because it's so easy in the business world to lose sight that education is bigger than just learning content. And there are teachers—students—that brought that to my attention. I remember after being the chief consultant of business education, assistant director for vocational education, and then the director, I got a letter when I was promoted to the director of vocational education and career technical education. I got a letter from one of my former students, and the letter said, "Congratulations, I am now a teacher in New Hanover County, and I remember observing you as being a student in the classroom." And she went on to say about how I supported—she didn't use these words, but—how I supported students with social and emotional, um, strategies, and she contrasted me to another teacher that was only interested in content. And it was just an ah-ha moment that teachers make an impact, not necessarily by the content that they teach, but how they teach and respect students and how they are a role model to students, and that was another ah-ha moment, something that, again, that one of my students had taught me.

Brooks: And—yeah, what if—how did you feel about transitioning out of the classroom after you had been teaching in the classroom for eight years or so?

Atkinson: Well, I missed students, and I miss having the feedback of immediate impact, so I had to change my way of thinking about impact. I knew that to have delayed gratification in the new job because I couldn't have that impact—direct impact—and it would take longer to have impact on students. So, I miss my students because I got lots of joy in teaching students. I remember a student who had never heard the word broccoli, and I dunno why that stands out, but she had never heard the word broccoli, and I loved that student, and she needed so much support. She had two children when she was my student as a junior in high school. And I knew that she needed me, and I found her a job where she did very well, and her supervisors were very supportive of her.

[01:10:06]

Atkinson: And I realized, unlike my students who had been in Virginia, I realized that some of these students had been cheated along the way, and I was trying to make up for

that in my class. And that's where it really hit me in the face of discrimination against some students. And that was hard for me to swallow. So after having left the classroom and having visited classrooms across the state, I saw the haves and the have-nots, and I saw how important money is to having equipment and having the necessary—in business education—the necessary resources to teach, and how that you could go someplace when they hardly had anything to teach students. And if you're teaching business course, you need tools and software and simulations and all these things, so, that was, I guess, another ah-ha moment: that money matters. And, so, to answer the question, I miss my students, but I did get joy in being able to go back to Hoke County and see the kids at Hoke County had the same, in some cases better, equipment than they may have had in another school district.

Brooks: And when you took the job, uh, as the chief consultant and left the classroom did you ever have any forethought about if you would be back in the classroom? And if you wanted to—how you wanted to keep your career going?

Atkinson: No, I just took it a day at a time. And, you know, I did, and I don't think I shared the goals with the other people that I wanted five-hundred people to come—I mean, six-hundred people to come—to the summer conference. I think I may have—I mean, of course I shared that I wanted computers in every business class in the state. So I guess I did have two or three goals, but they were personal goals as well as professional goals so. When I got to the point, I remember, when we were in Charlotte at the Radisson Hotel, and one of the staff members said that we had 599 or 595, it was only at that point that I thought, Alright, I've reached that goal. I need to see what my next job will be.

And so I think the director of vocational-technical education sensed that—and so one of the people that had been an assistant director had retired, and, you know, I don't remember if I interviewed for the job or I just got the job. [both laugh] I don't remember, but anyway I got the job as assistant director. So that gave me another challenge—to branch out beyond, uh, business education into work with agricultural education, train health occupation, marketing—I've left out some—technology ed, career exploration. So that was a great learning experience because in some respects all the people are different. You have homogenous group of teachers all interested in teaching business, and then you had branched out, and I realized that each of the other areas in vocational—now career technical education—had their own culture, and sometimes I had to learn those cultures also, which is a good challenge for me.

And, I had goals. I mean, I was assistant director, so I was second, and I worked really hard to start what was called College Tech Prep in North Carolina—to get that started. And then the director of career technical education gave me the opportunities to be North Carolina's representative to the Southern Region[al] Education Board, so that gave me a broader view of education rather than just North Carolina, and I was a part of the Southern Legion of Education Board, a

really influential group in the South, in education, to establish the nine principles of how to make high schools that work. I was a part of that initiative, and I'm grateful to the director, Cliff Belcher, who had me as the representative of North Carolina, and then he retired, and Bob Etheridge was the state superintendent at the time, so I interviewed for director of career and technical education and got that job, but I was happy with that [both laugh]. So, I never thought very much about my next job. What propelled me to the next—to look was the accomplishment of goals I had for the job I was in.

[01:15:25]

Brooks: And how—this is kind of going back a little bit—but how was the transition from Charlotte to Raleigh?

Atkinson: Um, I found Raleigh, at the time, to be very traditional, even in its dress, compared to Charlotte. I remember going out to dinner, uh, when I first got here, and I remember dressing up in a strapless dress with high-heels and the couple who—it was—I had a date with someone—and the woman who was a part of the double date had on loafers, a khaki skirt, and a button down, blue collar shirt. [laughs] So, needless to say, I stood out with this strapless dress and high heels. So, I found Raleigh to be much more traditional in its approach to the social environment, as compared to Charlotte. And I found that people in the network where I was to be much more conventional and to be much more conservative than what I found my environment and my social world in Charlotte to be. Um, so that was a little adjustment, but as it was an expectation in my work to travel a lot, so, I traveled throughout North Carolina, and I really wasn't in Raleigh very much, and so I kept my social network in Charlotte for many years, and I remember coming home from the airport after having flown somewhere, and I'm thinking, You know what? If I had a flat tire, I don't know a soul. I don't have a friend in town to call to come and help me out. So, it was at that moment that I thought, Well, I better establish some friends in Charlotte. So I went to establishing some friends in Charlotte, and I did have an advantage in that my college roommate lived here in Charlotte—

Brooks: Raleigh.

Atkinson: I mean, here in Raleigh. And I lived with her husband and children for the first two months of being in Charlotte—I mean being in Raleigh. And I'm grateful for Elaine letting me stay at her house that length of time [laughs].

Brooks: So, uh, what was the—so I think—I think we've done three—yes, three jobs with the department—so what was the next step after the director of technical—

Atkinson: —career technical education. My next, uh—the department went through major downsizing, and one of the things that they did was to move career technical education to be a part of instructional services. And I think because the state

board chair and the associate superintendent responsible for making decisions saw potential in me, even though they eliminated—even though they had merged—career technical education with instructional services, they created a position called, assistant director of instructional services and head of career technical education. So, they created a position so they wouldn't have to fire me, and there was a director of instructional services, Bill Spooner. So, Bill and I—I had responsibility for what I'd had all along, career technical education, as well as some responsibilities for all of the other program areas in the department—English, science, math, social studies, arts education, physical education. So, Bill was in that position for about maybe two years, maybe not quite that long, and so he retired, so I applied for the instructional services directorship and got it.

[01:20:20]

Atkinson: So, that was my next job, so I was head—so I was the director and still maintained head of career and technical education. So, that was my next job. And I stayed in that position during the tenure of Mike Ward, who was superintendent at the time. Oh, I had just been placed in that position as director before he became superintendent, and so I maintained that job while he was state superintendent.

Brooks: And what were some of the challenges you faced as you moved up in the ladder?

Atkinson: Well, the challenge of being the instructional services director was that I had to work with people who didn't necessarily see the value of someone having a background in career technical education. And I did not have a background in math, science, English, language arts, social services, so, again, I had to prove myself as someone who could be a leader who could value their expertise. One of the first things I discovered when I became director—I knew it—but there were no procedures, no processes in place, for developing the standards for schools to use in all those other areas. So, one of my first tasks was to convince the director—I mean the chief consultant for the math, English, language arts, social studies, etcetera, that you needed protocols to have continuity in how you develop standards. Because a first grade teacher had to use the math standards, the English standards, the social studies standards, the arts standards, and if they were all different and if the math standards for first grade did not take into consideration that you had to teach science and social studies, that you would be placing undue burden on the first grade teacher because math people would say that you have to teach math six hours a day, [Brooks laughs] so you had to have some give and take. So, one of the people most opposed to having standards was the person I appointed to be the person to develop the standards [laughs].

Brooks: Wow.

Atkinson: So, I made sure we had representation from all of those groups. I made it a responsibility that the person on the committee—and I met with them—that they

would go back and get feedback from their colleagues. So, from the very beginning, I involved them in developing the processes—for developing the processes and procedures—for developing standards, and it took about a year for that to happen. But it was a good thing I did that because the *Leandro* case—one of the biggest cases in North Carolina's history—about that all students should have a basic education program. And one of the most important components of that work was that there were standard procedures in developing the standards of what students should be able to do and all that subject areas, so we had done the work. The standards had been revised and always should be revised, but I was the one that started that work. And it was very gratifying to see that people in the division of instructional services finally embrace those standards and they considered it the bible for how they revised standards on what students should know and be able to do.

And then another important component of my work was to integrate curriculum where necessary and where it would make a difference in student learning, and that was another goal I had, was to integrate technology as a part of all the other areas. 'Cause I knew vocational education could not have a monopoly use of computers—that it had to be in the other areas also. And then, another aim was that all the standards would externally get good ratings from the companies—I mean, well, organizations, not the companies—that would rate how our standards are compared with others—other states.

[01:25:16]

Brooks: So, you said that one of the challenges was kind of having to prove yourself, did you have, kind of, a—what's the word I'm looking for—any go-to methods for kind of proving yourself?

Atkinson: Um, in all of the positions that I've just mentioned, with the exception of business education chief consultant, I was the first woman ever to hold that position. And I have found—or my experience has been—that when a man is placed in a leadership position, he is automatically trusted to be a leader. I have found that when I—when a woman—when I was placed in a leadership position that I was trusted after I proved myself. And, I have found that to be true in all positions that I have held.

So, here are the strategies I'd used during the time—and I don't know—I'm sure I learned them somewhere, from somewhere, but not necessarily one place. Here's number one: be willing to listen. And validate the people, uh, who are telling you their points of view. So, validate the person being listened to. Three: Give credit to other people for their ideas. And when in doubt, if you want your staff to support you, give them credit, even though it may have been your idea. And three, I mean—whatever number. [Brooks laughs] Five? Whatever. Be sure to keep tallies and follow up on what you want people to do. And then other one that I've learned on the way is that when you want people to make change, chunk the

change, so it will not appear to be huge undertaking. I mean, for example, going back to the computers being used in accounting, where it was just built in to use general ledger in accounting. Well, you can use it in all of accounting. But take something that's familiar, and add another component, and then before you know it, you have champions. Then, another thing that I've learned is that you build champions, and one way I always judge my effectiveness in a leadership position is whether I heard people in the field saying what I had said a million times. That was always validation for institutionalizing and making necessary changes. And then another one is to be genuinely interested in the people you work with. So, I always made it a point to learn people's names, to find out something about them that made them happy, and made them smile, and use that as a way of learning about them so they would open up and would be willing to follow you. And another one is when you make a mistake, admit I made a mistake and let people—and it took me a while to learn this one—but let people see you as a human being, as a person. So, I always made it a point, when I first started meeting with people—when I was in a leadership position—to invite them to my home, to have them be here, or wherever I lived. So that they could see what was important to me. So, there's some of the strategies that have worked for me over the years. Um, they worked very effectively because I have yet to have a job where I was not effective, [laughs] and I'm saying that as—[laughs] I'm saying that not as a bragging way, but I'm saying that because the evidence shows that I've been effective in the jobs that I've had. And, as being an elected official, I also realized that you have to take credit for what you have done.

[01:30:25]

Brooks: And how does it feel to know that men in the roles you've had maybe didn't have to employ those same strategies, or you know—

Atkinson: Well, in some respects I saw it as a game, um, and I saw it as something for which I should not take it personally. I just sort of accepted the fact that's just the way it is, I can't change the world, but I can change people within my atmosphere—I mean within my environment—to make the necessary changes. So, you know, I didn't let it bother me. I mean, I could rant and rave, but one of the things I've tried to do is uplift women, or even men, 'cause if you have all women within an organization then you tend to—I saw men being somewhat treated as a woman been in another situation, and this is something I always made a point to do: be in meetings—another thing I've learned. You're in a meeting, mixed group—diverse—men, women, or just men, and maybe a couple of women—and you'll see woman, you have a problem you're trying to solve, and you'll see a woman say, "Well, I think we should do a-b-c-d." No one pays attention, you keep on brainstorming, keep working, and there's a man in the group, and the man says, "I think we should do a-b-c-d." It's the very same thing that the woman has said twenty minutes ago. I always made a point to say, "John, that's a great idea, and I'm glad you are supporting what Sally said as the approach that we should take. So, Sally, we're celebrating, or we're glad that you had that idea twenty minutes

ago, and thank you, John, for validating her point.” I always made it a point to do that. And then, toward the end of my superintendency, we had some meetings where there would be more women than men, and I saw that happen to males, and I tried to do—and I did the same thing.

So, um, in some respects I accepted it, and I sometimes took advantage of my being a female, and this is what I mean by that. When you think of southern men, men who are—I’ll say—over seventy, and you have a woman and I was younger, at one point, than I am now, but sometimes older men in leadership positions would look—and I’m speaking in generalities—but look at younger women as being vulnerable, as being helpless, and so when I sensed that, I would use it to my advantage to say like, “Would you help me do a-b-c-d,” or, you know, “I need your help a-b-c-d.” And, more than likely, the men would help with a-b-c-d, so the big idea was to get the job done, to accomplish something, and it wouldn’t—I wouldn’t necessarily have to have the credit, but I knew that was the best thing to do. So, I took advantage of being a southern female to get what I thought was right for kids done in our state [laughs].

And I used that with legislators, um, I used it with some uh, people in the Department of Public Instruction, I remember we used to have such a hard time of getting one deputy superintendent to get things printed for heaven’s sake. We come to me, here we were having a summer conference where we had—we needed two thousand copies of something done and the deputy superintendent—I don’t know why in the world the deputy superintendent would approve of duplicating requests at that time but nevertheless so, I would go—I remember one time going to the deputy superintendent, and I said, “I have this problem, and I need your help so much! We’re having two-thousand people at this conference, and our material hasn’t been duplicated yet, and we need to ship it so be there, you know how it’s important.” And he said, “Well, I don’t have much authority over that.” But then, within the hour, our stuff was printed. [laughs]

[01:35:41]

Brooks: Yeah, so you figured it out and got things done!

Atkinson: Yup. Yeah.

Brooks: So, have we covered your career up to when you became superintendent? Did we miss anything?

Atkinson: One thing that was very influential and helpful were the national, uh, positions that I held in associations. Um, John Bunch, when I was in Charlotte-Mecklenburg, gave me an opportunity to speak at a state conference, and that opportunity really made me interested in becoming a part of professional associations. So, I attended the North Carolina Business Education Association. I attended the North Carolina Vocational Association—the business education

division. So, I became involved at the state level with these associations, and I was appointed, um, as a regional representative to the National Business Education Association. Became involved in that organization, and I remember Anne Matthews, who was the chief consultant or the state supervisor of business education in South Carolina, was president of the National Business Education Association, and as we were getting on the elevator, as her term ended, she said, "June, you need to be the next president of the National Business Association when it's southern region's turn," because it rotated. And I never thought about being National Business Education Association president until Anne Matthews mentioned it. And I became the National Business Education Association president, and that was an experience that I'll come back to that if you would like. But then, uh, when I was—then I became—I was also the president of the Business State Supervisors Association. All of the state supervisors who had fifty supervisors, and I had an opportunity to meet people from all fifty states. And I was also the president of the State Directors for Career Technical Education. So, having that experience gave me insight and connections with people all over the United States. And, uh, that gave me some experiences that I would never have had, had I not had the opportunity to serve at the national level. And when I became state superintendent, um, I was president of the Chief State School Officers. But when I became state superintendent, I said to myself, Okay, I have done all of this work at a national level, I'm not gonna be president of the Chief State School Officers group. Well, that lasted for about seven years, and then I became president of the Chief State School Officers group, which was another wonderful experience. So, having that, uh, opportunity to be president of some national organizations was, uh, a really wonderful opportunity. I think I'm one of the few people in the United States having been president of the national—I know I'm the only person having been president of the National Business Education Association, and the State Directors of Career Technical Education, and the president of the chief state school officers. So.

Brooks: Wow. You were busy!

Atkinson: Yes.

Brooks: Yeah.

**[01:39:34] [End SHEOH_010_01]
[Beginning SHEOH_010_02]**

Brooks: Today is June 28, 2019. This is the second file for the interview with June Atkinson for the She Changed the World Oral History Project. Um, so we were talking about all the um, organizations that you were involved with and how busy, uh, you kept yourself. And—and then, we haven't really dug into your time as state superintendent, have we? [both laugh]

Atkinson: No.

Brooks: Does it—does it make sense to talk there?

Atkinson: Sure!

Brooks: Yeah, so two-thousand—August 2005 is when you began your first term.

Atkinson: Right. Mike Ward, who was superintendent at the time that I was director of instructional services announced that he was not going to run for state superintendent. I really liked Mike. I liked working with him I thought that as superintendent we had done a lot of great work in the Department of Public Instruction, that we were on the right track. I also thought, Well, I can retire. So what I'll do since Mike won't be superintendent, and I will work a couple a months after a new superintendent has been hired, and then, um, I'll just do something else! I've been in this building, grown up with this building, I came here when I was twenty-six years old, so perhaps I should do something else. So, after the word had gotten out that Mike was not going to run, a guy named Mike on my staff said to me one day, "June you need to run for state superintendent." My answer was, "Mike, I cannot run for state superintendent. I've never been involved with politics; I know nothing about that. I cannot run for state superintendent." And then, there were some from my regional coordinator staff members who said to me, another person is going to run for superintendent. Marshall Stewart, uh, who was head of Agricultural Education at NC State was going to run for state superintendent. And I said, "Well, if he wants to run for state superintendent, then I'm going to run for state superintendent." I said that jokingly. I did not mean it. Sorta like I did mean that when I told my friend Dale that I wanted to become state supervisor of business education in Virginia.

But anyway, so, we had a meeting—I had a meeting with the regional coordinators in Raleigh, and they had put together an agenda, and on that agenda, uh, for our next meeting with directors, they had put something to the effect, uh, candidates for state superintendents will have an opportunity to speak, and they had Marshall's name and my name. I said, "Now this is really funny." But they said, "Marshall's going to run, and you said you were going to run." [Brooks laughs] I said, "I am not running for state superintendent. I remember what I said."

So, at the time I belonged to a group—and I still do—called the WOCUS. WOCUS stands for "Women of a Certain Age," then, now it stands for "Women of a Certain Attitude." [Brooks laughs] But the only purpose of the WOCUS was to have fun while traveling. So, we had planned—I guess in February—a cruise. And I am at the airport waiting to get on a plane for us to fly to our cruise, and I get a call from, uh, CTE director—career technical education director from Union County—the county right outside of Charlotte. And Charles says to me, "June, the WOCUS are going to talk you into running for state superintendent." "Charles,

I'm not running for state superintendent. I know nothing about running for state superintendent."

But anyway, we go on the ship and every time one of the WOCUS saw someone or met someone from North Carolina, and the WOCUS would say, "This is June Atkinson she's going to run for state superintendent." Well, on the way—there were five of us or six of us, I think, who flew out of Raleigh—and we stayed another day visiting Cape Canaveral. And anyway, I said to them, "Do you really thing I can run and win for state superintendent?" And they said, "Oh, yeah we're gonna work for you. You can." So, to make this long story short, I decided to run. Not realizing they were already three other people running on the Democratic ticket. And two people running on the Republican ticket.

So, my friends organized a grassroots effort because being in career technical education because of travelling all over the state I had a connection in every single county in North Carolina. They worked really hard. I had no idea how difficult it was to raise money in order to let people know you're running for state superintendent. Um, had a primary. Uh, Marshall got the most votes, but he did not get enough to prevent a run-off. I asked for a run-off. In the run-off I won sixty-five percent or something like that. Went to the general election. I won by, I dunno, seventy-nine hundred votes. In fact, I went to bed the night of the election thinking I had lost, and my thought was, "How in the world am I going to get that corn plant and that Ficus tree from the sixth floor to my house, [Brooks laughs] and where am I going to put the Ficus tree and the corn plant?"

[00:06:21]

But anyway I awakened to sound of my friends laughing, and what happened is I had gone ahead of Bill Fletcher, who was my opponent. And anyway, uh, I had won. And because I had not won by the necessary number Bill asked for a recount. He asked for a recount, and during the recount he went to court asking the superior court judge to stop the recount, and the superior court judge said, "No. We'll go with the recount." The recount declared me as the winner, and so I'm going about getting a transition—I have a little office in the Department of Public Instruction, and something was just uneasy inside me. My family was going to Opryland Hotel for Thanksgiving, and my nephew was visiting me, and I was going with him to pick out his outfit because he was going to hold the Bible for me. I had bought a dress and paid way too much money for a ball dress to wear to the inaugural event. Anyway, my husband and John Robert and I were meeting at Cracker Barrel for dinner and I got there and Bill said, "News people have been and T.V. people," and he said it very calmly, "Have been calling at the house trying to find you, and they want to interview you." And I said, "For what?" And he said, "Well, I didn't ask," but anyway my phone rings and it's a news—I mean, uh, T.V. reporter, and he says—he asks where I was and he asks, may could come interview you?" I told him, "I hate to ask this question but for what?" And he told me that even though we had been to superior court another

time, and he threw out the case of my opponent. Um, he petitioned the state supreme court to make—to stop my being, um—

Brooks: Inducted?

Atkinson: Certified state superintendent. And anyway, the call was about that the supreme court had decided to hear his case. And not only had they decided to hear his case, they decided to hear his case either three days to five days after the inaugural ceremony. So that meant, number one, I couldn't go through the inaugural events and could not be sworn in as state superintendent. So here I have this beautiful dress and nowhere to wear it, so I tell my husband, "Bill, I'm going to wear that dress even if it's to the Harris Teeter to buy milk and bread. I'm going—I'm going to wear that dress." And of course, the outfit I had bought John Robert was too no avail. So I'm thinking, This is something. What do I do? And I get a call from an attorney representing the Democratic Party, and he said, "June, you may not know this but in the constitution there's a little provision that says that if you have a contested election for council of state member, then either of the respondents can ask the assembly to make the final decision.

[00:10:10]

Atkinson: So, I said to him, "John, don't you think that the state supreme court would make the right decision?" And he said, "June—" this is my introduction to partisan politics—"June, the supreme court is comprised of people—a majority of the Republican Party. The general assembly is comprised of a majority of the people in the Democratic Party. Now, you as a Democrat, where do you think you have a better chance of getting the better deal?" I said, "Well, since you put it that way, let's petition the general assembly."

So, come January, we ask the general assembly in a press conference to make the final decision. Well, what the general assembly discovered is that when the constitution was revised in the 1970s—1970, 1971—the law about how you decide a contested election was either lost, repealed, could not be found. So that meant that general assembly had to start from scratch, passing the laws about how to decide a contested election. The person appointed, uh, as co-chairs, were Deborah Ross, who ran for United States Senate, and Clodfelter, who was appointed mayor of Charlotte. So, they went through the process of holding hearings of determining how a contested election should be decided. They finally passed the law—and they had to be very deliberate about it—so in the meantime I, while they're doing this work, the state supreme court is deciding, and the state supreme court remanded the case back to the superior court judge where I had been a—felt like a million times before—three times, I think. And anyway, on the day that we are to go to superior court for the judge to hear the case about how my election should be decided, the general assembly passed the law that goes to Governor Easley for signature, and five or six minutes before the court is to, uh, start, an intern brings the ratified law to the attorney—to my attorney as well as

the attorney general's office—outlining the process. So, he hears the case, the judge rules that the general assembly shall make the final decision. Even though I had won by seven thousand—over seven thousand votes because the recount had been completed. And the other wonderful news was that when, at that time, you changed the part of the voting law you had to have—North Carolina—had to have it cleared by the Department of Justice, and it takes the Department of Justice—the United States Department of Justice—and that Department had ninety days to pre-clear. So, the judge ruled it had to go to, um, Washington. And so it's ticking. Time is ticking. And I should've been sworn in January, and now it's June, July, and it is pre-cleared, in the July part and that was the time when the general assembly was deciding whether or not we were to have a lottery. So they could not get around to my election. So finally, uh, they had to meet in a joint session of the house and the senate and cast paper ballots for who should be the winner. So, Senator Clodfelter and Representative Ross made the arguments. They voted, and they voted that I would be the state superintendent, and the votes were somewhat along party lines, but there were many Republicans who voted where you could not read how they had voted, and I thought that was very clever, smart, because the people whose ballots you could not read that couldn't say that they voted against someone in their own party, and they would not say they voted for me, a Democrat.

[00:15:34]

So, I thought that was very brilliant on their part. So, they voted, I walked downstairs, Secretary Elaine Marshall swore me in, and I went to the department, and in the latter part of August I was state superintendent. So I was a year behind—almost a year behind—serving as state superintendent.

Brooks: That's so much for a job that you weren't really gonna run for in the first place!

Atkinson: [laughs] Oh, I know! And I thought a million times that one of these days I'm going to finish a book, uh, called, "What Was I Really Thinking?" And there was a country music song called, "I Know What I Was Doing, What was I Thinking?" And that song played over and over in my head, "I Know What I Was Doing, What was I Thinking?" So, you know, I had almost a year, but running is not a vacation. That's hard work and after being elected I had from January until August to do whatever I wanted to. So, I travelled, practiced yoga, worked in my garden, so, it really—I really was ready. I didn't realize how tired I was until after I had all that time to rest and relax. So, um, I told Bill that he was a sore loser, but one thing that I've also learned along the way is have tough skin, so Bill and I were friends, [laughs] but that was a long ordeal. My goodness, that was a long ordeal.

Brooks: And so, did you take time off or had you left your previous position in order to run?

- Atkinson: Yes, when I ran, I actually retired from the Department of Public Instruction.
- Brooks: Mm. Mm. And you thought you might do that anyway, so.
- Atkinson: Yes. So, I was able to retire, which was good, and that gave me the flexibility financially so that was—I was glad that I had that opportunity. Retired for a little while.
- Brooks: [laughs] A little taste of retirement. Um, and then—for twelve years, so each term was four years?
- Atkinson: Yes. The term I always use—its sometimes very difficult to explain how long I did I serve because it was almost, almost twelve years, but it wasn't twelve because of that time I was there. But as state superintendent, it really was important to me, important to me to increase our graduation rate, to build a statewide system of technology to save teachers time, and to have quality standards, and to change the accountability system we have in North Carolina. And, you know, all of those goals were accomplished but not to the level I would like to have seen them. And in some respects, it's good to be able to leave a job, especially if you think people following behind you will carry the torch, to leave things undone. I also wanted to increase our reading achievement of our students because I recognize that's a skill that's serves people for a lifetime. So that was another goal to improve student achievement, and also to have a statewide system of early preschool education to serve every child in North Carolina. And we've yet to reach that goal, but, I mean, really think that's important to increase student achievement in reading. I mean there's enough research to fill this house to show how important it is, and it's just amazing to me how the general assembly can keep having more and more studies, and all those studies went to having preschool—quality preschool—education for every child especially the most vulnerable.
- Brooks: And what do you think are the most important characteristics of being a good leader, especially in that position? At the superintendent level?
- Atkinson: One, to have experience in education or in the field where you are going to lead. Two, to have empathy for the people you are trying to lead. Three, have a—I mean, whatever number—have a framework of change in mind so that you can make change. Uh, I've seen leaders falter so often to say, "We've gotta change. We've gotta change." Well 'change' wears out people if you don't know how to make change.

[00:20:30]

- Atkinson: So you have to have a framework for change, and the framework that I've used, um, comes from the book *Switch* by Dan and Chuck Heath, but, um—but the other thing that you have to keep in mind—you talk about the characteristics of a

leader—is that a leader must understand that leaders have just one thing in common, just one: followers. And if you don't have followers, you cannot lead. You cannot be a leader if no one—if you look behind you and no one is with you. So, in order to have followers you have to use persuasive skills. You have to be a good salesperson. You have to recognize that little things matter greatly, and that you have to value and show that the people that you want to lead are valuable enough for you to listen to them and to make adjustments based on listening, and you've gotta stretch people. I remember when we got money from Race to the Top, that I knew that that was our opportunity to make a statewide integrated technology system that we now call, "Homebase." And I remember presenting this chart to my leadership team, and I know they all wanted to laugh, and they did laugh because, um, we did have that kind of relationship. But they did laugh, and they all worked like Trojans to get that system in place and it worked, and it still works, and of course it needs revision. Another thing about leaders is that you have to give them a reason for listening to you.

Brooks: And I just realized—and before I forget again—we kinda blew past that you got your doctorate degree in the late nineties?

Atkinson: Mm-hm.

Brooks: Wow, so what was the impetus behind the decision to go back to school and get that degree?

Atkinson: I co-wrote a text with a man, Grady Kimbrell, from Santa Barbara, California. And the book is help with business and computers careers. And one day he and I were talking, and I said to him, "Grady, I have been so lucky in all of my jobs," and he said, "June, have you ever thought the reason why you thought you were lucky is because you had the preparation and experience so when luck walked by you, luck was able to tap you for that job." And I thought, Hm, well, that makes sense. That's another ah-ha moment. So, when the Department of Public Instruction went through its downsizing, I did not have a doctorate, and I thought, Hmm. What if I want to become associate superintendent? This job, my job, has just been—for all practical purposes if it had not been for some people to help me out, I would have been ripped from the department, so maybe I need to go back and get my doctorate. So those two things were impotence [sic] for me to go back and get my doctorate at [North Carolina] State [University]. And I chose State because State was on my way home, and it was just easier for me to stop by there. And I had taken some continuing education courses along the way, and it's just those two, that comment, the experience of being downsized, that, Hm, well, maybe I want to do something else and I might need a doctorate to do that. So that's why I decided to finish my doctorate.

Brooks: So how did you find the time for that?

Atkinson: It was very hard. Because every weekend I would be at home writing my papers. I'd work at night. I was very—uh, I can be very disciplined when I want to, so I just segment my life: I have fifteen minutes to read, fifteen minutes to talk to people on the phone. I remember my friend Elaine—who lived down my street and was my college roommate and the person she lived with—she would call, Elaine did not work outside her home and so time was not important to her and I would have to say, “Okay, Elaine. I only have fifteen minutes to talk with you.”

[00:25:21]

So, I don't know how pleasant I was to my friend, but it was very difficult because I had to spend my weekends writing, reading, and of course I traveled a lot. So, one thing about being in a hotel room at night, that will give you opportunities to study.

Brooks: That's true. Um, and you can talk a little bit about just, kind of, your general reflections on having traveled around the state so much? Like, what is—what stands out to you about having the opportunity to see the different parts of the state.

Atkinson: One, there are some wonderful restaurants around North Carolina. In fact, one of my favorites I think it's Sixth and Main or Seventh and Main in Wilkesboro, North Carolina. Two, this state is extremely diverse, and its people are very different. I'll just give you an example: When I was running for State Superintendent I was in Harnett County, at a Democratic rally, there you had to literally stand on a stump to give your stump speech, and after I finished people came up to me and said, “You aren't for raising taxes, are you?” I left that place and went to northern Orange—I mean northern, uh, Chatham County near Chapel Hill—and as I was meeting and greeting people in the people in the Democratic Party they asked me, “You are for raising taxes to improve education?” And so that's another thing that stands out in this state. People in the western part of the state, which I really relate to because I grew up in a mountainous area, really have a culture that is different from down east. And so, North Carolina's texture of people is extremely rich. And that, to me, that is something to be celebrated. And the comment—like, being in the western part of the state to hear one say, “You're not from around here, are you?” Or to go to the eastern part of the state and hear a different accent, to be in the, like in Raleigh, and Charlotte and Greensboro with its diverse peoples and cultures and to go to Crabtree and to see people from all kinds of different countries. It's just really amazing how diverse North Carolina is.

The fourth thing is how kind and beautiful and wonderful people are in different parts of the state. I have just been so blessed by comments of people across the state and the kindness of people. For example, as state superintendent, I received a little postcard from a church in Hickory, North Carolina saying, “We are praying for you,” or a little note from someone I may not have met, um, but would send

me a note to say, “I know you’re state superintendent, and I’m wishing you the best.” Or a person I met who sent me a note, so there’re kind and beautiful people all across North Carolina who really want the best for their children. So that’s another thing that I’ve learned. And another one is there are so many wonderful places to visit in North Carolina, and I’ve often said that after—when I left superintendency—I would go back to the places where I wasn’t able to spend a whole lot more time. Because there are just so many kernels of gems all across this state and it’s fun to be there and explore, so.

[00:30:00]

So that’s been a wonderful part of being state superintendent. The other thing I really like are the interactions I’ve had between kids across the state. [laughs] They’re fun.

Brooks: Yeah. Um, and so why three terms? Was it—was there something specific that made you run again those other two times?

Atkinson: Well, I ran the second time because I was late coming to the office, and there were other things I wanted to do. And then the third time I ran—I mean, so that was the second time. The third time I ran I thought, Should I really run again? And then I thought, You know, our graduation rate isn’t at eighty-six percent where I want it to be, and there were people who came to me and said, “June, will you please run?” And I knew that—I mean, I knew Bev Perdue—the second time I knew that I had—I mean, I knew she was Democrat. We had worked together, so I thought there would be an opportunity. There were some challenges I had the first time over who had the authority to run the Department of Public Instruction. And then the second time Governor Perdue appointed one of my professional friends, and friends, Bill Harrison to be state board chair and that was an excellent appointee—I meant appointment. But she also declared that he was going to be the chief executive officer for the Department of Public Instruction and that was my constitutional responsibility, so I sued the State Board of Education and the governor to, um, for my constitutional right to run the Department of Public Instruction. So that was my second term. I mean, I went to court another time. Another man, Bob Orr, was my attorney. So it took me 'til July for that to be decided. So, again, I missed, um, January to July with the department being in turmoil. So that was the second time where the chief—I mean, the superior court—declared me the winner and declared me the person to run the department—I mean, the state superintendent to run the department.

And then the third time was vacillating; I'm thinking, Oh my gosh, I don't have a very good track record. I had to go to court the first time, [Brooks laughs] the second time, am I jinxed? What would be reason for the third time? But, anyway, I finally—my friends said that I needed to run, so I ran the third time. And I really vacillated the fourth time, and I ran for state superintendent, and I really had not planned to run, because my mother, uh, was—you know, she was eighty-some,

eighty-five, eighty-six, my aunt was older. I was responsible for both of them. And Bill Coby, who was the state board chair, who was appointed by Governor McCrory, said, "June you need to run." Another friend of mine said, "June you need to run." And I ran and lost, so, you know, in retrospect I probably should not have run, but I did and that's water over the bridge [Brooks laughs]. But, so, they're the reason I ran all of those times [laughs].

But, uh, you know, I really ran candidly from the point where I felt as if I could do great things for kids. And so they are the reasons I ran all of those times, the reason—other than to have the support of friends and others who said, "You need to run." And I was complimented that Bill Coby, who had served as United States congressperson—congressman—who was a Republican—I really enjoyed working with him. We worked in a nonpartisan way—of course, we talked about politics. It was a joy to work with the board that was appointed by Governor McCrory. I mean, I enjoyed working with all of the boards, even the one I had to sue. I mean, I told them all ahead of time that I was going to sue, but I just thought that the board that the governors had appointed, um, for the State Board of Education were wonderful, dynamic people, and I enjoyed working with them so much, so it was hard for me to say to Bill Coby, "No, I can't run again," so I didn't [both laugh].

Brooks: So, I'm not sure if I missed something. I'm confused about the second time that you had to go to court. Someone was trying to give your job away, essentially is what it sounds like?

[00:35:05]

Atkinson: Yeah. Governor Perdue by practice, um, shared her desires for Bill Harrison to be appointed as the State Board of Education chair. And then, the—she told me, and it was told at a press conference, that she was appointing Bill Harrison as the chief executive officer to run the Department of Public Instruction. So when she told me that before the press conference where she was going to announce it, I said to the governor, "Governor, that's unconstitutional because the constitution says that the state superintendent shall be the chief executive officer of—for—uh, chief administrative officer for the State Board of Education, and she'll run the Department of Public Instruction."

So, the day that she made the announcement that she was appointing Bill Coby as—not Bill Coby—Bill Harrison as the State Board of Education chair, and she was appointed Howard Lee to head the educational cabinet. She also announced that Bill Harrison was going to run the Department of Public Instruction. So when she made that announcement, I was standing there, and I did not want her to make that announcement that day, but she did. And so when she made that announcement people in the press started having this puzzled look. And so, they said to her, "Governor, the superintendent was elected. We thought it was the superintendent's job was to run the Department of Public Instruction." So her

answer was something that, “So June is going to be the ambassador for public education, and Bill is going to run the Department of Public Instruction.” So, my thought was, Ambassadors are appointed. Superintendents are elected in this state.

So, she called on me to speak at that press conference. I really wasn’t prepared—well, I’m always prepared to speak, but I wasn’t prepared to really speak that day. And I have no idea what I said, but I left that office—but I left that press conference and could hardly get back—hardly wait to get back to my office. I was also thinking, Boy, why didn’t I wear waterproof mascara today? Because I was crying. And by that time the news had spread to people in the office, and I walked in, and I closed the door to my office, and that’s nothing I ever did.

But Monique, who worked with me, opened the door and came in said to me, “June, you’re going to have to fight this, because this is not right.” And I said, “I don’t know how to fight this. I mean, this is like David fighting Goliath,” and I should know as I’ve gone to church my entire life, ‘cause she said, “Jane you’ve gotta remember that David won!” And I went, “Hm.” [Brooks laughs] And that was another ah-ha moment for me. Because, you know, I’ve told you about some ah-ha moments—that was another ah-ha moment. And just those words gave me the impotence to try to figure out how to fight it.

And I didn’t know exactly how to go about fighting that, but I wrote a letter to the general assembly members because they had a study about governance and public education. I appeared before a committee, and I gotta—so I’m just wallowing, and, okay, how do I do this and what do I do? I contacted the attorney general’s office to see about representation of me as a counselor state member. And Bob Orr called me at the center of constitutional law and said would I like to talk to him? And I went to talk to him, and he presented, you know what happened in the past, and I said, “Give me a week to think about it.” So I came back told Bob, “Yes, I’d like you to represent me, and, yes, let’s go forward.” So here I am embroiled in another lawsuit. So, [laughs] another ah-ha moment is pay attention in civics classes. [both laugh] Pay attention to—because I have spent a lot of time, for a person who has never done anything besides a traffic ticket, to be in court as much as I have. So it has been a struggle.

[00:40:15]

It was a struggle for me to just have the responsibility to really run the Department of Public Instruction. So, you know, it’s almost as if I missed almost a year of two terms of really running the Department of Public Instruction.

Brooks: But it sounds like you got a lot done anyway. You got the graduation rate up, right?

Atkinson: Mm-hm. Right.

Brooks: So, your projected goal?

Atkinson: So, when I was elected state superintendent the first time our graduation rate was sixty-eight percent and when I left it was almost eighty-six percent. And I contribute that increase to the hard work of people in the Department and most importantly the superintendents and teachers across the state. I saw it as my job as Foster Troy, a journalist from Oklahoma said, "To afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted." So, I would say to staff, "We need to celebrate each year our graduation rate goes up." And it went up every single year I was state superintendent, and I would say, "We need to celebrate this." Even if you were at a wedding, asking—and you were asked to give a toast—find a way to fit in, "Best wishes to the bride and groom, and, oh by the way, did you know that North Carolina's high school graduation rate is at an all-time high?" [Brooks laughs] So I always tried to keep that in the forefront of school districts as well as the Department of Public Instruction—the staff members. And I'm very pleased about that we did have the highest graduation rate, and the other thing that I'm really pleased about outside of having the highest graduation rate ever is that we closed the gap—not entirely, but we made a big dent in closing the gap—in graduation rate of our African-American students and our Caucasian students. And that's really a bright spot because we had never done that before. So, I'm happy about that.

Brooks: Um, and can you tell me a little bit about Emerald Education?

Atkinson: Um, after losing the election and after leaving the department, some really great people also left the department, and the people in the department who had left, uh, decided to come together to form Emerald Education. And Emerald Education is the brainchild of Jennifer Curtis, who is the founder and president of the company. So we have been in business for about a year and a half and work with school districts in North Carolina, as well as school districts outside of North Carolina, to help with professional development, and to help schools assess where they are, and to make recommendations as to some strategies to improving student achievement and growth. So, we are rapidly becoming a million-dollar business, and it's been fun to work with colleagues who have passion about improving student achievement. And it's—it's nice to be able to pick and choose those things which I want to do, and pick and choose things I prefer someone else do [both laugh].

Brooks: So, about how much time do you spend?

Atkinson: It depends, I would say maybe twenty percent of my time is with Emerald Education. And depending on how I become involved in some of the really great contracts, it may increase to forty—uh, forty to fifty percent.

Brooks: Wow. That's great. How many people are on staff there?

- Atkinson: We have approximately four of us who work full-time, and then we contract with others, and then we have people who have invested in the organization who also work with us sometimes.
- Brooks: Uh, this might be one of those questions that people, like, just hate getting 'cause it—it's kind of asking you to boil things down, but I'm curious what you think is the biggest challenge facing education today?
- Atkinson: Institutionalizing pre-school education for our most vulnerable is a huge challenge for North Carolina.

[00:45:17]

When you look at other states where they're having a lot of success, you see that has been one of the major strategies. So, that's one of the challenges. The second challenge is how to incorporate, use technology to the advantage of the student and the teacher. And that is always changing. The third is maintaining and increasing the support for public education. And that's the area for which I am the most worried.

And here are the reasons why: about eighty percent of the people who live in North Carolina do not have children in public schools. And, for many people who do not have public school education, what is happening in public education is frozen in their minds. And they do not see—some do not see—that it is in their own interest to have quality public education. I mean, the physician, the nurse, the physical therapist, the automotive technician, the heating and air conditioning person, the physical therapist—all of those people need a great education in order to help us as individuals. So, we have so many people not having children in school.

The third is that venture capitalists may see education as one of the frontiers of a place to make money, and therefore you see more lobbying, more money invested in private education and the privatization of public education. And you see that through the voucher bill. You see that through money being invested to take over the innovative school districts, where our most vulnerable children are at the mercy of companies for profit coming in and taking over a school. So maintaining and increasing that support for public education is—will be—a huge challenge.

Another one is attracting and keeping quality educators in the field, and we need to address salary, working conditions, respect for teachers. Teachers did not go into education to make millions, but they didn't take a vow of poverty. And about anywhere from eighty to eighty-five percent of people who are teachers in our state are women. And traditionally, women have gotten the short end of the stick when it comes to salaries and that legacy still exists in education. I mean, the day is gone where you have women working in public education who don't need money. They aren't necessarily married to people who have higher salaries.

They're working because they have to work, or they want to work and want to make a difference. So, there are the big challenges I see for public education.

Brooks: Wow. Um, I saw that you—so you have authored books, and we have talked about a few of them, um, what is *The T-Shirt Named Zee*?

Atkinson: Okay, as state superintendent I was asked to speak, um, to student groups across the state, and one thing I know about being an educator—or having been an educator—is you want to keep, or get and keep the interest of young children, you have to tell stories. So, I was asked to speak in Greensboro to third, fourth, and fifth graders, for thirty minutes—well that's a killer [laughs]. So, I thought, What in the world am I going to do? So, I decided, Okay, I'm going to write a story. So I was upstairs, in my office, which also serves as a bedroom, and I had a t-shirt on the bed, and I thought, Okay, I have written a story about—a true story about the three little pigs and the senior project."

[00:50:05]

Uh, I can't think of anything about the three little pigs that will interest them, so I just started writing, and I wrote the story about a t-shirt named Zee, and it's about a t-shirt who goes to school, to Cotton Elementary, and he's afraid that he will not be able to read well or to do math. So the story is about t-shirt Zee developing resiliency and empathy and perseverance—those three character traits. So, when I went to the school, I asked for two—I mean three volunteers, and I brought t-shirts and a whole bunch of stuff, and I told them the story of, *A T-shirt Named Zee*, and then that caught on! So every time I was asked to speak to a class, I would bring the book, *A T-Shirt Named Zee*, and gave all the students a copy of it [Brooks laughs]. Then, I would ask them, "What would you change about the story and what do you think should be my next story?" So the children gave me lots of ideas, so I wrote another book about *T-Shirt Zee goes to the Eighth Grade*, and someday I might write more stories about t-Shirt Zee, but the kids gave me more ideas than I could ever implement, and they were great ideas.

Brooks: And was *The Three Little Pigs*, was that a similar—teach something, get a point across?

Atkinson: Yeah, it—I was asked to speak to a group of teachers about the importance of students completing senior projects, so what I did was to take the little pig whose house was made of sticks—no, what was first? Straw? And I compared that to his school—that he went to school—there was no relevancy, and then when he got his diploma, the Big Bad Wolf huffed and puffed and blew his diploma away, and he did have anything, and it didn't mean anything. And I went to the stick pig, [both laugh] or the pig whose house was made of sticks, and he did a little better, but the wolf did the same thing. Then, I went to the house—I mean, the pig whose house was made of bricks and talked about how he had done a senior project—a graduation project—and he could see the relevancy of his learning and then when

the Big Bad Wolf tried to blow away his diploma, he huffed and he puffed and he could not blow it away because the diploma meant something. [laughs] So, I told that story to teachers and that was another ah-ha moment that stories really make a difference in people remembering what you're trying to get across.

Brooks: Yeah, whether they're kids or adults.

Atkinson: Right.

Brooks: Yeah, I would assume that the *Three Little Pigs* story was for kids, but it was for teachers.

Atkinson: Right.

Brooks: It applied. Um, so I have some general wrap-up questions. Is it okay if we go there?

Atkinson: Sure.

Brooks: And one of them is—this isn't—this is specific to you, but kind of along the theme of our project, which is focused on women, um, and, kind of, women in leadership roles. So, like, in terms of your career, computers, business education, finances, you know, all of the roles that you've played—none of those are traditional roles for a woman. How do you feel about that?

Atkinson: I feel as if you are correct because all of those roles, except that—my first job in administration—were firsts for women. And, um, I am pleased when I look across the state to see how many local superintendents are women. We are at an all-time high of women being local superintendents. And I'm hoping that as the years go by, that I would be able to say that I was the first elected state superintendent, but not the last female elected as state superintendent. So, I hope along the way I have carved the path for other women, to follow. And it was—you know, as I was state superintendent I—there have been at least ten women who have said to me, "I want your job one day," and I said, "You go for it."

Brooks: And what about computers and technology and business and how, you know, those aren't traditional feminine areas either?

Atkinson: No, and that's one of the reasons why, as state superintendent and as in career technical education I have supported initiatives for STEM—science, technology, engineering and math—and to have special programs or additional programs for young girls to learn how to code, to learn about all of the positions that are available, and in my own personal life with, um, nieces and nephews and goddaughters, and to talk with them about STEM careers because [laughs] we don't—I believe that it's important both for males and females to be able to pursue the career regardless of who has been in that career before, and I find joy in going

to a hospital and seeing male nurses, because that field should have been open to males all along, and at the same time I find joy in seeing women, or females, in nontraditional roles as computer programmers or accountants or whatever.

[00:55:59]

So, that work has to be done by every generation because one thing I've learned: If you have worked to gain a right, or you have worked to gain something for a male or female, you gotta keep working at it in the next generation. And I'm hoping that people will continue to pick up that torch—that it's okay if a man wants to be a house-husband, that is just fine. If a woman wants to be a house-woman, that's fine, too. But that people should see that all occupations are available to them regardless of whether they're male or female.

Brooks: Um, what's your definition of success, and has it changed over time?

Atkinson: My definition of success [laughs]. A warm feeling inside, knowing you have made a positive difference in at least one person's life.

Brooks: And do you think that's changed over time?

Atkinson: No. For me, no I don't think so. You know, it was hard for me to transition from being state superintendent where I worked, you know, ten to twelve hours a day, sometimes seven days a week, to the brakes being applied, to "Okay, what can I do today?" And my neighbor, who is from Turkey, and I were talking about how hard that transition was for me, and she said, "Well, maybe, June, it's important for you to have a smile, or to help just one person each day." And that was another ah-ha moment for me because she was exactly right, and I needed to relearn that lesson because as state superintendent, even though I couldn't see immediate results, and people don't know my name—would've never known my name—but I found joy in knowing I had a positive influence on that little child in Bertie County or someplace. So, um, that helped me come back to the warm feeling of making a positive difference and to realize that the magnitude might not be the same, but, nevertheless, it's just as important to touch just one person. 'Cause you never know how much that person will—how many people that person will touch in his or her lifetime.

Brooks: Yeah, that's kind of interesting because one of the—I think something that's held people back from participating in our project is that it's called, "She Changed the World," and people are like, "Well, I don't change the world. You know, I do this or this for my community, or I do this or this for my town," or whatever. I try to explain to people that, you know, no matter how small quote unquote you think the impact is, it's changing the world, maybe not all—the whole world—at one time, but, you know, as you said, you never know who those people are going to have an impact on, and—

Atkinson: You know, I think of my own life and how the ah-ha moments that I just mentioned—like Margery Crumbly—who really was a role model, the way she entered the room, the way she walked with confidence—never knew my name, but she had an influence on me. Sylvia, the business teacher, probably never knew that she had an influence on me as a person. I've told Monique, the person who said David and Goliath, she changed me, and consequently because changed me I was able to make some changes also.

[01:00:29]

Atkinson: I think of Grady, who made that one comment; he changed me. So, I can just list all—Shirley Williams, who said, "For heaven's sake, make up your mind," changed me. So, I think of all those examples. All of those people had a part of making me who I am, and I know that if those people had that in changing me, then I know that other people can make comments, and it doesn't mean that you have to—like my mom, or my aunt, or my grandmother or my aunts and uncles who have changed me, they've been with me. But all those other people—you know, just a fleeting moment. So, you never know when you're going to change someone who can make great change.

Brooks: And what is a notable woman?

Atkinson: A woman who is not afraid to be notable. I think that one of the things that holds back women from being more notable is that they are too humble, and they are afraid to step forward to say, "I can, I have, and I will make a positive difference." That is one thing that has changed about me over the years. In this day in time, I believe it's really important for women to appear confident and to recognize and to speak up about how they can change people, places, and things.

Brooks: Great, um, is there anything we haven't discussed? Anything you wanna talk about that we haven't touched on?

Atkinson: Well, one thing that I have not touched on—I have not said much about my family and my faith. Both my family and my faith have been extremely important in sustaining me through the ninety-nine percent of the wonderful times in my life as well as the one percent of those disappointing times. So, I'm very grateful for my faith, and my family, and I'm very grateful for my mother and my family taking me to Glade Creek Baptist Church and Shady Grove Baptist Church and who have given me the foundation of faith that continues to sustain.

Brooks: And, um, we—I think you didn't mention but you ended up marrying again?

Atkinson: Yes.

Brooks: When did you marry your second husband?

Atkinson: [laughs] I married my second husband about fifteen years ago. He and I had the longest dating experience of anyone I know. We dated for about twenty years, and, uh, I was director of instructional services when we got married, and we went to a Hawaii and got married. And, uh, his name is Bill, and [laughs] we always joked in the office, "Which Bill called today?" because I worked with Bill Harrison, who continues to be a friend of mine, as state board chair. Then there was Bill McNeal, who was executive director of the professional association. Then there was Bill, my husband. Then I had another friend, colleague, who was named Bill. So, any time a Bill called the office they always had to put [laughs]—so my life has been filled with Bills, and by far my favorite has been Bill, my husband. [Brooks laughs] He was—until recently, he was an orthodontist, and he's a great writer, and we are very opposite of each other. But he's been a wonderful part of my life.

Brooks: Great. That's great. Anything else?

Atkinson: That's it.

Brooks: Okay, great! Thank you so much! I'm going to go ahead and turn this off.

Atkinson: Thank you, Ellen.

[01:04:50] [End SHEOH_010_02] [End Interview]